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A forgotten strategy for exiting Iraq / Even while fight goes on, give diplomacy a chance

John Arquilla

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The battle cry should be: "Negotiate now!"

The debate over Iraq, ensnared by the partisan duel for control of Congress, has increased in bitterness, with neither side paying attention to the real prospects for achieving a negotiated peace.

This oversight has made our troubles more intractable, and there are few signs that any real change in course from President Bush might be decisively in the direction of diplomacy. The extent to which the president is open to change seems limited, as he has put it recently, to "tinkering with tactics."

Those who would keep fighting bet military victory still can be achieved, while Iraqis continue suffering from sectarian violence until that victory arrives. The "stand-fast crowd" seems willing to fight to the last Iraqi, and it has been loath the past three years to countenance any kind of "negotiations with terrorists."

Conversely, those who advocate a firm date for withdrawal of American troops are driven by the belief that our invasion was mistaken, perhaps even illegal, and that we are obliged to leave, even if the Iraqi civil war escalates further after our departure. This "leave-soon lobby" seems more open to employing diplomacy now, as House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi has made clear, but is fundamentally focused on getting out of Dodge even if that means: after us, the deluge.

Both the stay and leave-soon options give the hapless Iraqi people little hope: They can either take their worst lumps now or later.

But this doesn't have to be the case. Instead of ceaseless bloodletting, there is a way to begin building peace right now, even in the midst of war. We have but to choose to follow in the steps of statesmen of the past who launched peace talks while fighting raged.

Indeed, diplomacy has been undertaken during the overwhelming majority of our conflicts, large and small, since the dawn of the republic.

It was true in the American Revolution. Fighting continued in the war, including much brutal killing between rebel and loyalist Tory factions, right up until the lengthy negotiations in Paris were concluded in 1783.

During the War of 1812, negotiators sought an end to the war. Andrew Jackson actually fought the Battle of New Orleans after the Treaty of Ghent was signed. And the wars in Korea and Vietnam both featured protracted peace talks, accompanied by unabated fighting in the field until treaties were signed.

So, in our wars, jaw-jaw has generally had to co-exist with war-war. World War II was the only significant exception. But in a conflict against networked insurgents in Iraq, it's pretty clear that our adversaries have no intention of simply surrendering. And, subduing one group wouldn't cause others to capitulate. Much violence would continue in any case.

Still, the insurgents' war aims are quite easily understood: They want American forces out of their country, and they want security for

the members of their group from attacks by other groups.

American requirements should be pretty simple, too. We should share the Iraqi desire for an end to civil war, and an assurance that al Qaeda and its affiliates would not be granted any haven in a liberated Iraq.

How hard can this be? If President Bush and the congressional leadership set their minds to negotiating, they'll find the going a lot easier than the military slogging of the past 3 1/2 years.

The key to success in negotiating peace is to engage the international community. Ignoring global dissent before the invasion of Iraq helped put us in the current sea of troubles. Embracing others now is the way out.

Iraq's neighbors must be very actively included. Even if we intemperately keep labeling Iran part of an axis of evil, it has an inherent interest in Iraq, a bordering country with a majority Shiite population. The Kurds are going to have to come to an understanding with Turkey, which cannot countenance a separate Kurdish state. And finally, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other Gulf Arab states can help serve as interlocutors for Iraq's imperiled Sunnis.

So far so good. But bringing real peace to Iraq also will require crafting a consensus in the United Nations, which must serve as the ultimate guarantor of any peace. The treaty that ends the strife in Iraq will have to be backed up by an international commitment to intervene militarily should the terms of the peace be violated.

It is clear from statements by U.S. Gen. George Casey and U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad that they believe all but a minimal U.S. force can be withdrawn from Iraq over the next year or 18 months. It is just as clear that, after such a withdrawal, neither the Iraqi nor the American people would support the return of a large U.S. military contingent.

Pursuing a path to peace calls for boldness on the part of our elected leaders, the kind that German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck showed when he brought the top diplomats of all the great powers together in Berlin in 1878 to end a Russo-Turkish conflict and avert a major new war among the feuding ethnic hodgepodge in the Balkans. Germany was a disinterested party with no specific claims to make, and a peace agreement was reached that endured for two generations.

Can history be repeated? Maybe it's time for another peace conference in Berlin.

The question is whether the United States will rise to the occasion. There are hints that we might as in the congressional Democrats' call (so far unheeded) some months ago for a peace conference on Iraq. Also, former Secretary of State and longtime Bush family aide James Baker, who heads the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, has stated publicly that he "likes the idea of negotiating with our enemies."

If we heed the calls for negotiation, peace may finally have a chance in Iraq. It doesn't mean that we will leave that tortured land immediately, or that the violence will suddenly stop. But talking about peace, even while still fighting, is better than either continuing a war without hope or simply surrendering the Iraqis to a perpetually bloody future.

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